On the Ron Paul Institute for Peace and Prosperity:

An Open Letter

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Like many I was pleased to see the first press releases that announced the formation of the Ron Paul Institute for Peace and Prosperity. I was further pleased to see that the Board of Advisors was to include Dennis Kucinich and Lew Rockwell. As it happens, I owe each of these gentlemen a debt of gratitude — a personal debt, something beyond what is their due by virtue of their public service. I hesitated for some time to write about this, both out of humility and for fear that my skills would be inadequate to the task. But eventually I realized that a debt is a debt: it ought to be acknowledged and, insofar as possible, repaid — and as promptly as possible.

First, then, let me explain the circumstances, taking them in chronological order.

Dennis Kucinich. Somewhat by accident I heard Congressman Dennis Kucinich speak at a 2002 conference commemorating the life and work of the psychologist Carl Rogers. I remember him entering the lecture hall at the last minute, perhaps having just arrived from the airport, carrying a large canvas sack of books he'd borrowed from the Congressional library. (This is not the debt I refer to, but the image it produced — not only that he was reading a lot, but that he borrowed books from a library — made such an impression that I once imitated it: speaking at a Tea Party rally about the "Ten Books Every American Should Read", I checked the books out of the public library and drew them from a tote sack one by one as I described them for effect.) But what really caught my attention was an almost offhand remark he made that "America has yet to rediscover its great tradition of New England Transcendentalism," or words to that effect.

It was not just what he said, but how he said it that struck me. It was one of those things a person says that are so simple and unaffected, yet so replete with significance, that they seem to come from a different part of the psyche than usual utterances. Something coming from the heart, we might say.

In any case, I made that moment a definite mental note to one day study American Transcendentalism. Much later, in 2011, I got involved with the Occupy movement, and searched from some ideological framework for what it was trying to accomplish. This I soon found in the writings of Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson, and in the American Transcendentalist literature generally. As I delved into this literature it seemed like a revelation, something of vital significance for our times. If we believe, as did the founders of our nation, in an overruling Providence that guides human affairs, then we have ample reason to see this literature as containing seeds planted over 170 years ago, not so much for its immediate effects
— which were, arguably, not great — but for future times, and perhaps for us now. Having now studied it, I can say that the Transcendentalist (and closely related Unitarian) literature of the 19th century has had a truly formative influence on me and on my work. And it is just possible that had Dennis Kucinich not made his offhand remark, I might never have studied it.

**Lew Rockwell.** I despised the Iraq War from the beginning, and my opposition grew stronger as it dragged on. Seeking anti-war news and commentary, I eventually discovered the website of libertarian economist Lew Rockwell. Searching it, I noticed a pdf file of a little-known gem of a book, *The Book of Peace,* published by the American Peace Society in 1845. This work proved a revelation. First, the anthology contains some of the most intelligent, insightful, and persuasive essays against war ever written. Perhaps equally importantly, it opened up to me an entire page of American history — the anti-war movement of the antebellum era — that few people today realize existed. I read these eloquent anti-war essays carefully, and even placed several, along with additional ones I discovered, on my own website to encourage their reading.

*The Book of Peace,* which I might never have known about had Lew Rockwell not had the inspiration to place online, has paid major dividends to me. It has enriched my thinking about the causes of war and its prevention, as well as my appreciation of American history and the literature and thought of preceding generations. One specimen of this literature is the great sermon 'On War', delivered in 1838 by William Ellery Channing. Channing was the grandfather of the New England Transcendentalist movement, and was, among other things, a direct influence on his one-time student, Emerson. This connection, then, supplied further motivation to closely study the American Transcendentalist literature.

**Ron Paul.** One sunny afternoon in 2010 I had the pleasure of hearing Congressman Ron Paul address an appreciative young libertarian-minded audience from the steps of the San Francisco City Hall. He cut a charismatic figure, tanned as though having just finished a set of tennis, and shedding his jacket and tie in the autumn heat. He talked about war and peace, liberty, economics, the state of the Republic, and a revolution. Near the end, he said, "I am firmly convinced that ... liberty is key, because it is under liberty that we are allowed to promote our *excellence in virtue.* That's what life should be all about."

These words, "excellence in virtue" had a galvanizing effect on me. Somehow I’d never before considered how excellence and virtue could be so connected. This simple juxtaposition of terms opened up new horizons in my personal growth. I soon discovered that the source of this concept of *moral excellence* is the *Ethics* of Aristotle, which I began studying. That eventually led me to an equally inspiring work, Cicero's *On Moral Duties,* and from that to the study of Cicero's other philosophical works. Not only has this study been immensely valuable for me personally and my work, it has given me a deeper understanding of the minds of such historical figures as Jefferson and Adams, who were well versed in classical philosophy, a fact people today easily overlook. So once again, a few almost chance words proved to have a major positive influence on my life.

What do all these instances have in common? In each case these gentleman helped me substantially, yet without realizing they were doing so or being aware of how powerful a moral and intellectual influence they were exerting. In each, simple actions or words sprung forth from their *character.* I propose that there is an important lesson here: if one wants to improve this
country, nothing matters so much as ones character and moral integrity, which may serve in a hundred small ways one doesn't even realize to have a major beneficial effect on others.

The above suffices to establish the existence of debts, but as yet I have not yet thanked them or attempted repayment. Accordingly, it strikes me that gratitude is better expressed in actions than words. If I had money, I would gladly donate to the RPI. But as an impoverished scholar I can only try to share what I do have, which are the fruits of my study and reflection, and these follow below.

I can admit that upon first learning that the RPI's mission was to promote peace and prosperity I was puzzled. Why not just an Institute of Peace? Why add "Prosperity?" Isn't an inordinate pursuit of wealth a leading cause of war and myriad other social problems? But later I reconsidered this view, and the occasion for doing so was reading the famous sermon of George Winthrop, "A Model of Christian Charity." This 1630 speech by Winthrop to the Puritans whom he led to Massachusetts is known to many Americans as the first use of the biblical phrase "a City Upon a Hill" to describe America's role. Ronald Reagan frequently used this phrase to express his own vision of America — a vision he stated most clearly in his farewell speech of January 11, 1989:

"A tall, proud city … God-blessed, and teeming with people of all kinds living in harmony and peace; a city with free ports that hummed with commerce and creativity…. And how stands the city on this winter night? More prosperous, more secure, and happier than it was eight years ago."

While Reagan did refer to God, he did not explicitly state what Winthrop understood as the central issue: America must be an example of a society founded on what he called Christian charity. Regardless of what Reagan actually said or believed, the fact is that in the mind of the American public Reaganism became associated with commerce and prosperity, not charity, or its offspring, peace and harmony.

The question, then, is whether these two goals — charity and prosperity — oppose or support one another. A close reading of Winthrop's sermon helps us see why the latter is the case. Now 'charity' is a word with several meanings. It can mean leniency in judging someone or something, or giving money to the poor. But Winthrop used the term to mean that form of Christian charity called agape. And he understood this charity as something that comes naturally and unforced as a consequence of (1) seeing oneself in other people and (2) from a sense of common purpose or mission. According to Winthrop:

"We must uphold a familiar commerce together in all meekness, gentleness, patience, and liberality. We must delight in each other, make others' conditions our own; rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together — always having before our eyes our commission and community in the work, our community as members of the same body."

Such a society of individuals linked to each other are a coherent unity, knit together by the "ligament of love." Just as a human body is exceptionally strong when all limbs and muscles work together, so is a society when all individuals are united in seeking the common good.
Winthrop suggested that a community so united would be so strong that "ten of us shall be able to resist a thousand of our enemies." While Winthrop did not explicitly say so, it follows from the same principle that an American nation thus united must also succeed materially. Such a people will choose worthy, inspired projects. Obstacles will be easily overcome. The generation of wealth will be almost effortless — as well it should be given the greatness of human potential combined with the vast natural resources of this land.

Therefore I believe that the RPI is correct in linking peace and prosperity, because both are fruits of charity, of a society united by common purpose and bonds of affection.

The social issues that confront our nation today can be viewed as sources of conflict, antagonism, and finger-pointing — in which case we will follow a downward spiral. Or seen as opportunities to regain our sense of national community. The task before us is implicitly acknowledged each time Americans recite the pledge of allegiance, that remarkable practice which, so far as I am aware, has no parallel in any other country. We must seek to become truly one nation under God, indivisible. Our peace, and our prosperity, will vary in degree according to our charity towards one another.